Yoga for Osteoarthritis Patients

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The Remarkable Benefits of Yoga for OA

Yoga is an ancient practice, traditionally bringing together the physical, emotional, and spiritual states for good health and enlightenment. However, you need not subscribe to every aspect of the yoga tradition in order to get something out of it.

Hatha yoga focuses on physical health and psychological relaxation (typically without the added spiritual element), and over 75 scientific trials agree that it can provide the gentle healing and strengthening that osteoarthritis (OA) patients need. Like physiotherapy, the right yoga practice will target the most troublesome joints and muscle groups, and like certain medications, it can help you reduce the tension and anxiety that make your symptoms more difficult to manage.

Before starting a yoga program, you'll need to talk to your doctor about what activity your body can and can't handle. Once you start a suitable yoga practice, you'll begin to see results quickly, regardless of your current fitness level.

How Yoga Goes Beyond Joint Health

OA management generally involves a varied approach, one that involves medicine and non-medicinal treatment. Physiotherapy is the leading drug-free treatment for arthritis, helping to restore your range of motion and keep your joints moving as easily as possible. Yoga integrates many physiotherapy principles, but it also adds an extra level of conditioning.

Working with static or slow muscle movements and controlled breathing, you can stretch, strengthen, and calm your body all at once. In fact, yoga will help you manage your condition in a few distinct ways:

Weight Loss

Think strenuous activity is the only way to shed some weight? Think again. Yoga may not have the high impact of running or the sustained exertion of biking, but you will certainly burn calories and build muscle for a stronger metabolism with a regular practice.

Since every pound you lose lifts about four pounds of pressure off your knees, even a modest weight reduction can have a remarkable difference in how you move and live with your OA. If you can't comfortably walk, jog, swim, or bike right now, give yoga a try for a few weeks – you may soon find that your body is ready for more activity.

Stronger Surrounding Muscles

As the muscles strengthen around your weight-bearing joints (knees, hips, and ankles), you will begin to walk and

move more easily, and for longer amounts of time without discomfort. Studies have found that Hatha yoga therapy reduces swelling, crepitus (friction between bone and cartilage), and morning stiffness in the joints.

In order to strengthen your muscles, you will have to put weight on them for stretches of time. While that may seem impossible to do at your current fitness level, rest assured that you can safely build up the weight bearing and resistance with modified exercises that will still build muscle (albeit a bit more slowly).

Less Stress, Better Sleep

Your joint health is a top priority, but there are other ways OA affects your health – and yoga can help with those challenges, too. Regular yoga sessions have been found to decrease anxiety and sleep problems significantly, especially when the practice involves a good measure of pranayama breathing.

Deep belly breathing can help you calm your mind and body in surprising ways. With the right breathing and a bit of practice, you can begin to control your blood pressure and improve your mood, which all results in less stress, and in turn, less pain.

Next Page: Best Yoga Poses for OA and Postures to Avoid

Best Yoga Poses for OA

Yoga can bring great benefits, but it’s not totally without risk. You have to make sure you’re doing the right postures – with the right form – in order to avoid injury and reap the rewards.

First, it’s important to start with a trained instructor who has some experience working with people who have arthritis or a related condition. You will likely need to modify some conventional poses to make them more comfortable, and your instructor can show you just how (and when) to do that.

When it comes to choosing a yoga practice, opt for a beginner Hatha yoga class, or one of its offshoots, like Iyengar, Krippalu, or Viniyoga. Here are some of the postures you should expect to try in class:

- Mountain pose
- Warrior pose
- Standing forward bend
- Standing side bend
- Cat cow
- Staff pose
- Seated spinal twist
- Diaphragmatic breathing

Generally, you’ll work from standing poses down to seated poses on your mat, and finish with shavasana, or corpse pose. There’s always the option to take a break in child’s pose or simply lay down on your mat during the routine, so don’t try to push through the pain.

The core of a good yoga practice involves careful movement and precise breathing (known as pranayama). Don’t discount the power of your breath – learning to control and balance your inhalations and exhalations is the best way to reduce your stress and improve your mood.

Postures and Practices to Avoid

In terms of prohibited postures, there’s a simple and straightforward rule to follow: if it hurts, stop. Any posture can be problematic if you take it too far, but for those with OA, back bends can be particularly hazardous. It’s important not to twist too much, bend too far, or push too hard in any pose, and it’s best to work under the watchful eye of your instructor to make sure you stay in a safe zone.

Once you get comfortable with yoga, you can begin to do some postures in the comfort of your own home, but you'll want to work in front of a mirror to watch your form. Better yet, work with a yoga video that's geared to arthritis sufferers – there are plenty available online, or else your yoga instructor will be able to suggest a suitable video for your fitness level.